

# OPEN AND SHUT?

Tuesday, March 08, 2011

## PLoS ONE, Open Access, and the Future of Scholarly Publishing: Response from PLoS

*Last year a researcher drew my attention to a row that had erupted over an article published in the **Open Access** journal **PLoS ONE**. Believing that the row raised some broader questions about **PLoS ONE**, and about **Open Access**, I sent a list of questions to **PLoS**. The publisher eventually declined to answer them, sending over a statement instead. I nevertheless decided to **write something**, but sent a copy of what I had written to **PLoS** before publishing it. And I invited **PLoS** to comment on what I had written. Below is the publisher's response:*

We were disappointed to see Richard Poynder's current article about PLoS, but grateful that Richard sent us a draft, so that we could prepare a brief response.

Richard is absolutely correct about one thing – we at PLoS are really committed to open access, and we are doing our absolute best to inspire a broader transformation in scientific communication. We make no apology for that. We expect to be watched and scrutinized and indeed have been the subject of some criticism over the years, but not at the length or with the amount of negativity that we see in Richard's essay.

Much of the article focuses on PLoS ONE and Richard uses some selected examples (about 5 of them) from the more than 17,000 peer-reviewed articles that we've published in PLoS ONE to draw much broader conclusions about the quality of its content. Although we would be the first to agree that PLoS ONE isn't perfect, neither is any journal, as Richard points out – although not until around 30 pages into the article. But, just to quote one statistic, is it not more striking that of the 4400 articles published in PLoS ONE in 2009 around 55% of them have been cited 3 or more times (Scopus data)? The evidence points to the fact that PLoS ONE is attracting a vast amount of high-quality content.

PLoS ONE is attempting to challenge the conventional model of a journal. The peer review criteria for PLoS ONE are focused on **rigour, ethical conduct and proper reporting**. Reviewers and editors are not asked to judge work on the basis of its potential impact. Our argument is that judgments about impact and relevance can be left (and might be best left) until after publication, and this argument is clearly resonating with the tens of thousands of researchers who work with and support PLoS ONE as authors, reviewers or editors. It's now also resonating with many other non-profit and for-profit publishers who are **exploring the same model**.

We do not argue that the PLoS ONE approach is the only way to publish research, and indeed we view PLoS ONE as just one aspect of a much more fundamental transformation of scholarly communication.

Another aspect of that transformation is in the assessment and organization of research findings, which is currently done using conventional journals. That's why we have launched **article-level metrics** and **PLoS Hubs** as new and alternative approaches to post-publication evaluation. There will be much more to come from PLoS and **many other innovators**.

At several points, Richard's article uses quotes from staff, press releases and so on that are now several years old and misses the point that much has changed even in the short few years since PLoS ONE launched. We are learning all the time from PLoS ONE. His frequent quotes from PLoS staff also show that we've answered many of his questions (including some less than friendly ones) over the years.

Nevertheless, he places great emphasis on the fact that we declined to answer a set of more than 20 detailed and complex questions about general aspects of PLoS ONE, as a follow up to a series of exchanges about the peer review process on a particular **PLoS ONE** article about which there was some disagreement. Indeed we **posted a comment** to try and clarify the issues in light of Richard's questions, and comments from researchers. We were surprised by the number and wide-ranging

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nature of Richard's subsequent questions about PLoS ONE, and chose not to answer them because we felt that the issues surrounding the PLoS ONE article were closed. If Richard had signaled his intention to write a lengthy article about the history and status of PLoS at the outset of the exchange, our response might have been rather different.

But the more significant point is that PLoS ONE has evolved since its launch. We did originally place a lot of emphasis on 'commenting' and 'rating' as tools for post-publication assessment, but we rapidly realized that much commentary and other activity happens elsewhere. If we could capture this activity and add it to the PLoS articles (in all our journals), that could be a powerful approach to post-publication assessment, and could also be used to filter and organize content. Thus, the article-level metrics project was born. The PLoS ONE editorial and publishing processes are also under constant review and revision as the journal's size and complexity has grown, and we post some updated general information about these processes on the PLoS ONE web site.

Another theme in Richard's article is whether PLoS ONE represents value for money. PLoS Journals are an ecosystem and they all contribute to the whole, both financially and to PLoS' reputation and brand. Looked at in isolation, PLoS ONE, as well as the Community Journals (PLoS Genetics, PLoS Computational Biology, PLoS Pathogens and PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases), all make a positive financial contribution to PLoS. They help to support PLoS Biology and PLoS Medicine, as well as the development of the journal websites and other important initiatives such as article-level metrics, PLoS Hubs, PLoS Currents and our work on advocacy. From the PLoS authors' perspective, wherever they publish in PLoS their work will reach anyone with an interest in it, and their work will be stamped with a brand that is associated with social change, innovation and quality. There's much more to value than the direct costs of publishing a single article.

And a final point on value. Publishing in the conventional system is estimated to cost the academy around \$4500 per article. What PLoS (and for that matter BioMed Central, Hindawi, Co-Action, Copernicus and other successful open-access publishers) is showing is that high-quality publishing can be supported by publication fees that are substantially less than the costs of the conventional system.

There is a revolution in the making, and despite the wealth of support that we are seeing, it won't be comfortable for everyone. We need constructive criticism, but also some optimism and creativity to make it work. There are grounds for hope that we've moved beyond the antagonism that has characterized many discussions around open access. There really is a lot to celebrate.

The article can be accessed [here](#).

\*\*\*\* UPDATE FEBRUARY 2012: AN INTERVIEW WITH PUBLIC LIBRARY OF SCIENCE CO-FOUNDER MICHAEL EISEN IS NOW AVAILABLE [HERE](#) \*\*\*\*

Posted by Richard Poynder at 10:36



Labels: Gold OA, PLoS, PLoS ONE

## 1 comment:

Richard Poynder said...



For the record, PLoS ONE posted its comment on the Wind Setdown paper on 30th September 2010 -- in response to questions raised by the journal's own academic editors.

I sent my list of questions to PLoS ONE on 5th October, partly because the PLoS statement appeared to raise further questions.

June 09, 2011 9:10 am

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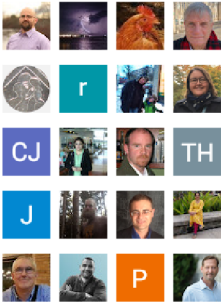
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